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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that anyone who teaches English or who wants to write or publish must be sensitive to the issue of gender equity in language, whether in the use of police officers, not policemen, flight attendants, not stewardesses, or the exclusive use of the masculine pronoun, which was the standard years ago. Writers can avoid gender bias by making a gender-neutral noun plural which allows for the use of the plural pronoun which is gender neutral. The use of "they" or "their" as singular pronouns which refer to an indefinite pronoun is becoming widespread and acceptable, even though indefinite pronouns are singular. Some grammarians suggest writers revise any sentence which uses a gender-specific pronoun, in such a way that the pronoun is eliminated altogether. English educators must decide if, in the interests of redressing a historical imbalance, they should follow President Clinton's lead--he recently used the feminine pronoun alone in his State of the Union speech--and advocate the use of the feminine pronoun alone in reference to a gender-neutral noun. Contains 5 references. (NKA)

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Gender Equity and the State of the Union

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Gender Equity and the State of the Union

President Clinton's 1998 State of the Union Address contained this most interesting sentence:

> If you know a child from a poor family, tell her not to give up – she can go to college. (3-4)

The sentence is interesting, not only because of its encouraging message, but also because of its use of the feminine pronoun only in reference to the gender-neutral noun, "child". When a President sanctions such usage in a State of the Union Address, it becomes, like Reverend Hale's books, weighted with authority. It endorses the exclusive use of the feminine pronoun and gives writers, certainly American writers, permission to adopt the practice if they wish to do so and, if need be, to justify their decision to any who might protest.

Anyone today who teaches English or who wants to write and publish must be sensitive to the issue of gender equity in language. Today's editors and publishers insist we read and write about police officers, not policemen; about flight attendants, not stewardesses; about letter carriers, not postmen. Similarly, they demand sensitivity on the issue of singular pronouns used in conjunction with gender-neutral nouns. The exclusive use of the masculine pronoun, the standard years ago, is not accepted today. This sentence:

A good doctor will not feel threatened if one of his patients asks for a second opinion;

will not make it past a copy editor any longer.

Gender equity is usually established by including both pronouns in a sentence such as the one above:

A good doctor will not feel threatened if one of his or her patients asks for a second opinion.

But if the pronouns have to be repeated, writers will usually look for alternative ways of expressing the thought because the repeated use of both pronouns interrupts the rhythm and flow of the sentence and makes it appear wordy. For this reason, the White House speechwriters did not have the President stumble over this sentence:

If you know a child from a poor family, tell him or her not to give up – she or he can go to college.

Another way writers will often try to avoid gender bias is by making a gender-neutral noun plural which allows for the use of the plural pronoun which is gender neutral. Instead of writing:

A student with more than three overdue fines will have his or her library privileges suspended;

we can write:

Students with more than three overdue fines will have their library privileges suspended.

But this construction is not always the best because the singular conveys a sense of emphasis and a familiar tone which the plural does not. The White House speechwriters

knew that the President's sentence would lose some of its force and the familiarity he wanted to project if he had read :

> If you know children from poor families, tell them not to give up – they can go to college.

Some writers will always choose the plural pronoun even when the noun –antecedent is singular. Recently this sentence appeared in a local newspaper in an advertisement for an all-candidates meeting for a forthcoming election:

> Each candidate will have ten minutes to discuss <u>their</u> platform.

There is some support for this usage because "their" is gender neutral, and thereby obviates the annoying need to include both the masculine and the feminine pronouns. Miriam Watkins Meyers examined the writing of 392 college juniors and seniors, ranging in age from 22 to 64 and concludes that the use of "they" and "their" as singular pronouns is quite widespread. But the grammar check on my computer has flagged my "Each candidate"sentence and asks that I change "their" to "his or her." Similarly, widely-used grammar handbooks will not sanction the use plural "their" with a singular noun. Hacker, for example, refuses to accept this sentence:

> Every runner must train rigorously if they want to succeed.

She insists "they" be replaced with "he or she" (325). It's unlikely that English teachers will ever accept a sentence that uses a singular noun as the antecedent for a plural pronoun.

On the other hand, the use of "they" or "their" as singular pronouns which refer to an indefinite pronoun is becoming widespread and acceptable, even though indefinite pronouns are singular. Certainly they demand singular verbs: Everyone *is* happy;

Nobody *sees* him anymore. But Burchfield, in the latest (1996) issue of the influential *Fowler's Modern English Usage* cites two examples from contemporary published writing, which sanction the use of "their" as a singular pronoun, when used in reference to an indefinite pronoun:

> I feel that if someone is not doing *their* job it should be called to *their attention.*
>
> A mission statement that is sufficiently bland to encompass everyone's conception of *their* role in the university is of little use to anyone.

He goes on to say that, while the issue of the acceptance of such usage is unresolved, "it begins to look as if the use of an indefinite third person singular is now passing unnoticed by standard speakers (except those trained in traditional grammar) and is being left unaltered by copy editors" (776).

Some grammarians suggest writers revise any sentence which uses a gender-specific pronoun, in such a way that the pronoun is eliminated altogether. This method sometimes works well. This sentence:

> A skater must be on the ice for hours every day if he or she wants to compete in the Olympic games;

could be changed to:

> A skater must be on the ice for hours every day to compete in the Olympic games.

But eliminating the pronoun completely often leads to a slight but significant change in meaning or a less clear and concise expression of the idea, often requiring a rather awkward use of passive voice:

> If you know a child from a poor family, tell that child not to give up – a college education can be acquired.

In their new handbook, *The Everyday Writer*, Lunsford and Connors suggest that the sentence:

> Every citizen should know his rights under the law;

can be amended to read:

> Every citizen should have some knowledge of basic legal rights (141).

But this change does not work as it clearly alters the meaning of the sentence.

Some grammarians suggest male writers use the masculine pronouns and female, the feminine, an intriguing compromise, though not one a President or another male power figure could adopt with impunity. Others suggest writers alternate between the masculine and the feminine but this quickly becomes confusing, as the identity of the noun-antecedent is obscured. Still others suggest we introduce a new pronoun into the language, a singular pronoun that is gender neutral. "Ter," for example, could replace "her" and "him," while "te" could replace "she" and "he." This solution would have the President say:

> If you know a child from a poor family, tell ter not to give up—te can go to college,

Had he said this in a State of the Union Address, he would likely have had to sacrifice his hopes for the election of a democratic Congress.

The President's decision to use only the feminine pronoun is both understandable, politically, and justifiable, linguistically. He really had no other choice. Moreover, he is hardly alone, as the exclusive use of the feminine pronoun is becoming widespread. I am currently reading a collection of papers on recent theory and research in written composition, *Cross Talk in Comp Theory*, edited by Victor Villanueva Jr. In many of

these papers, feminine pronouns alone are used in reference to the gender-neutral nouns, writer, student, and teacher.

English educators must decide if, in the interests of redressing a historical imbalance, they should follow the President's lead and advocate the use of the feminine pronoun alone in reference to a gender-neutral noun. It is not an easy construction to avoid. A writer's style can be impaired if she (!) has to use both pronouns, switch to the plural, or use passive voice to bypass the pronoun completely. Now some exceptions to the exclusive use of the feminine will have to be made. English contains some nouns which are gender neutral but which carry such strong gender-specific connotations that the sole use of the feminine pronoun might seem inappropriate:

> On a passing play, a linebacker must protect her (?) quarterback.
>
> We hope the bishop will assign to us a priest who will put the needs of her (?) parishioners ahead of her own needs.

Common sense must dictate pronoun choice in sentences such as these.

But for the scores of gender-neutral nouns free from gender-specific connotations, the time has come to redress historical inequities, take the President's lead, and accept, if not promote, the exclusive use of the feminine pronoun in sentences for which no other option is viable.

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